



Press Release - 6 March 2025

Report uncovers serious failure to protect EU Seas – NGOs call for full use of Marine Directive

ClientEarth, BirdLife Europe & Central Asia, Seas At Risk and Surfrider Foundation Europe call on EU leaders to urgently address the serious failure to protect EU seas that has been confirmed by a [new report](#) published by the European Commission.

The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) is the key framework for the ecosystem-based management of all human activities at sea. It sets a series of indicators for achieving good environmental status (GES) in EU seas by 2020, requiring action to prevent and reduce pollution, and protect biodiversity.

But the evaluation report published today highlights that, despite progress in some areas, EU countries have mostly failed to protect EU seas. In particular, nutrients and chemicals still cause harm to marine life and marine biodiversity continues to decline.

NGOs are calling for the European Oceans Pact to address shortcomings highlighted today – such as lack of enforceable provisions, policy coherence and funding. The Oceans Pact must call for the strengthening of the MSFD as an overarching framework by tightening the links with the Marine Spatial Planning Directive and the Nature Restoration Regulation. It needs legally binding and measurable targets and thresholds to achieve GES, including the effective management of at least 30% of EU seas as protected areas by 2030, including 10% under strict protection.

Bellinda Bartolucci, Senior lawyer at ClientEarth said:

“EU countries pledged to protect and restore the EU’s seas by 2020, but have completely missed this legal deadline. Protecting EU seas is not just an environmental duty — it’s an economic and social necessity. Healthy

marine ecosystems are essential for coastal communities and sustainable fishing practices. Without urgent action, we risk losing the very foundation of our blue economy and the natural resilience of our oceans.”

Tobias Troll, Marine Policy Director at Seas At Risk said:

“The MSFD is the EU’s overarching tool to achieve healthy marine waters and for the ecosystem-based management of all blue sectors. It is failing miserably in implementation and the Oceans Pact needs to address this as a priority. We need much closer alignment between the MSFD, maritime spatial planning, fisheries and other sectoral policies, with legally binding environmental targets.”

Gaëlle Haut, Surfrider Foundation Europe said:

“Despite the Marine Directive providing a holistic approach to ocean protection at the EU level, its proper implementation has fallen short due to a lack of political will and insufficient resources. It is time to strengthen it and translate our duty to protect EU seas—both for present and future generations—into concrete results and use the Marine Directive as the foundation of the Oceans Pact in all its dimensions.”

Cyrielle Goldberg, Marine Policy Officer at BirdLife Europe said:

“Despite a solid EU legal framework for the protection of our seas, the Commission’s report is clear: Member States have consistently failed to properly implement their obligations and, consequently, to ensure effective protection of the marine environment. At a time when global political instability and the alarming effects of climate change are increasingly putting European society at risk, it is urgent to reverse the trend and to invest in long-term marine protection and restoration, ensuring a healthy and prosperous future for all.”

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) is an EU law adopted in 2008 to protect and restore marine ecosystems while ensuring sustainable use of marine resources. It requires EU member states to achieve Good Environmental Status (GES) in their marine waters by 2020.
- The MSFD sets out eleven descriptors to achieve good environmental status, including conserving biodiversity as well as tackling

anthropogenic pressure, e.g. contaminants, marine litter, underwater noise, eutrophication, and seabed damage.

- Each country must develop a Marine Strategy in six-year cycles, including assessments, monitoring, and action plans. However, as reports show, many countries have failed to meet the 2020 targets.
- Read our [joint submission to the European Oceans Pact Call for Evidence](#).
- Read the [Blue Manifesto](#) – our roadmap to a healthy Ocean by 2030.

About us

ClientEarth

ClientEarth is a non-profit organisation that uses the law to create systemic change that protects the Earth for – and with – its inhabitants. We are tackling climate change, protecting nature and stopping pollution, with partners and citizens around the globe. We hold industry and governments to account, and defend everyone's right to a healthy world. From our offices in Europe, Asia and the USA we shape, implement and enforce the law, to build a future for our planet in which people and nature can thrive together.

BirdLife Europe & Central Asia

BirdLife Europe and Central Asia is the European Division of BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of more than 120 national conservation NGOs working to protect birds, their habitats and global biodiversity. Based in Brussels, we connect and support the work of 46 Partners across the region, including in all EU Member states. Based on our distinctive science-driven collaboration, we advocate for policies that conserve and restore nature, focusing on species, sites and habitats, ecological sustainability, and engagement of people.

Seas At Risk

Seas At Risk is a Brussels-based NGO campaigning for the protection and restoration of the marine environment. Together with its 30+ members from all over Europe, it works to make sure that life in our seas and oceans is abundant, diverse, climate-resilient, and not threatened by human activities.

Surfrider Foundation Europe

Surfrider Foundation Europe, an NGO created in 1990, works to protect the oceans, the coastline, and their users. For 30 years, with a team of experts and 50 volunteer branches in 16 European countries, the association has been working with stakeholders (citizens, private and public sectors) on several major issues: marine litter, coastal development, climate change, water quality and user health.

Available resources:

- [Blue Manifesto](#)
- [Blue NGO submission to Ocean Pact call for evidence](#)

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